

Vammika Sutta

The Discourse on the Ant-hill

[Similes for the spiritual training]
(Majjhima Nikāya 23/1:142-145)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2009

1 Introduction

The Vammika Sutta records a 10-question riddle told by a non-returner brahma (called *devatā* or deity here) to Kumāra Kassapa [2], who is still a learner (*sekha*). The brahma's riddle, in summary, runs thus:

There is an anthill burning day and night. The brahmin says: 'Take your tool, Sumedha (sage), and dig.' As the brahmin digs, he comes across, in turn, a door-bar, a frog, a forked path, a strainer, a tortoise, a butcher's knife and chopping block, a piece of meat. All these are thrown away and he is to dig on. He finally comes across a cobra, whom he is not to harm, but to honour.

At the suggestion of the deity (*devatā*), Kumāra Kassapa relates the riddle to the Buddha, who solves it. *The anthill* is the body; *the brahmin*, the arhat; *the knife*, wisdom; *digging*, effort; *the door-bar*, ignorance; *the fork in the path*, doubt; *the sieve*, the five mental hindrances; *the tortoise*, the five aggregates of clinging; *the butcher's knife and the chopping block*, the fivefold pleasures of sense; *the piece of meat*, delight and lust; and *the cobra*, the arhat monk. [5]

2 Kumāra Kassapa

2.1 LAST LIFE. Kumāra Kassapa is the foremost among those monks who have the gift of versatile discourse (*citta,kathikānam*) (A 1:24). His mother is the daughter of a seth [financial entrepreneur] of Rājagaha, who, failing to obtain her parent's consent to become a nun, married and, with her husband's consent, joins the order, not knowing that she was with child. When her condition is discovered, her colleagues consult Devadatta, who declares that she is no true nun.

The Buddha, on being consulted, entrusts the matter to Upāli, the Vinaya expert, who proposes that the lady Visākhā and other residents of Sāvathī investigate the matter (a trial by jury of sort). Then he presents the findings before an assembly, in the presence of the rajah, declaring that the nun is innocent, as her conception has occurred before her ordination (J 1:148). The Buddha praises Upāli for so wisely handling the case (AA 1:283).

When the child (a boy) is born, the rajah himself adopts him, and at the age of 7, he is ordained. Hence, he comes to be called Kumāra ("the boy") because he joins the order so young, and is of royal upbringing ("the prince"), and also because the Buddha, when sending him little delicacies, such as fruit, refers to him as Kumāra Kassapa.

Kumāra Kassapa is ordained in his twentieth year. A doubt arose as to whether this is valid because, according to the rule, the candidate must have attained full twenty years for ordination. The Buddha declares that the period includes the time spent in the mother's womb. (V 1:93; VA 4:867)

Once when Kumāra Kassapa is meditating in Andhavana, a non-returner brahma, who was his companion in the time of Kassapa Buddha, appears before him, and tells him a riddle of ten questions, which only the Buddha could answer. This leads to the teaching of the Vammika Sutta (M 23). After reflecting on its teachings, Kumāra Kassapa becomes an arhat.¹

It is said that his mother weeps for twelve years because she could not be with Kassapa. One day, seeing him in the street, as she runs towards him and falls, and milk flows from her breasts and wets her robe. Kassapa, realising that her great but worldly love is preventing her liberation, speaks harshly to her that she might give up her attachment. The ruse succeeds and she becomes an arhat that very day (DhA 12.4/3:147).

¹ MA 2:120-122; J 1:147-149; AA 1:283; DhA 12.4/3:144-147; ThaA 1:322.

2.2 PAST LIVES. In the time of Padumuttara Buddha Kassapa was a learned brahmin, and having heard a monk ranked foremost in eloquence, he wished for a similar distinction and did many acts of piety towards that end.

During the time of Kassapa Buddha (the Buddha just before ours), when his teaching was declining, Kumāra Kassapa, together with six other monks, vowed to live a life of rigorous asceticism on a mountain-top to attain liberation. On reaching the summit with the help of a ladder, they threw it off, and began to meditate. The eldest attained arhathood in three days, and the second attained non-return, but the remaining five died of starvation on the seventh day without any attainment.

These five companions were Pukkusāti, Bāhiya Dārucīriya, Dabba Malla,putta, the wanderer Sabhiya and Kumāra Kassapa.² It was the non-returner brahma who appeared before Kumāra Kassapa and gave him the riddle.³ This same brahma also suggested to the wanderer Bāhiya to meet the Buddha.⁴

2.3 TEACHINGS CONNECTED WITH KUMĀRA KASSAPA. Although Kumāra Kassapa is said to be a very eloquent speaker, records of his teachings are rare. Two elder's verses ascribed to Kumāra Kassapa have been preserved:

201	<i>Aho buddhā aho dhammā aho no satthu sampadā yattha etādisaṃ dhammaṃ sāvako sacchikāhiti</i>	Hail to the Buddhas! Hail to our Teacher's attainment, in which teaching therein a disciple will realize.
202	<i>Asaṅkheyyesu kappesu sakkāyādhigatā ahuṃ tesaṃ ayaṃ pacchimako carimo 'yaṃ samussayo jāti, maraṇa, saṃsāro n'atthi dāni punabbhavo 'ti</i>	Through countless aeons, they have attained individuality: this is the last for them, this is the final body, samsara with its births and deaths— there is now no more of this rebirth!

The Aṅguttara Commentary (AA 1:285) says that the Buddha declares Kumāra Kassapa as the foremost of monks who are versatile in teaching (*citta, kathikānam*) on account of his skilfulness in his argumentation with Pāyāsi, as recounted in **the Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23). However, this is unlikely because, according to Dhamma, pāla's Vimāna, vatthu Commentary, the events of the Pāyāsi Sutta occur after the Buddha's death (VvA 297). The Sutta, however, does attest to Kumāra Kassapa's teaching skill.⁵

4 Andha, vana

Andha, vana was a grove one *gāvuta*⁶ to the south of Sāvattihī.⁷ During the time of Kassapa Buddha, bandits waylaid a non-returner layman named **Sorata** (or Yasodhara, according to the Samyutta Commentary) in this forest. Sorata had been touring Jambu, dīpa (ancient India) collecting donations for a Buddha's caitya (reliquary cairn). The bandits gouged out his eyes and killed him. The robbers then all lost their eye-sight and wandered about the forest blind. Hence, the forest's name of "Blind Men's Forest," and it retained this name for two Buddha-periods.⁸

During our Buddha's time, Andha, vana is well guarded, and monks and nuns would spend solitary retreats there. There is a meditation hall (*padhāna, ghara*) built there for the use of monks and nuns (MA

² UA 77-9, esp 80 f, 96 f; AA 1:278-283; DhA 8.2/2:209-216; Ap 533/2:475-478.

³ For the fuller story, see **Bāhiya S** (U 1.10/6-9) = SD 33.7 Intro (2).

⁴ See **Bāhiya S** (U 1.10/6-9) = SD 33.7 Intro (2).

⁵ Cf MA 2:335.

⁶ A *gāvuta* is quarter *yojana* (which is 7 mi = 11.25 km); as such a *gāvuta* is about 3 km or 2 mi.

⁷ SA 1:189.

⁸ MA. 2:122,6-124,13; SA 1:189,8-14.

2:124). **The Bhikkhuṇī Saṃyutta** is a record of nuns—Āḷavikā, Somā, Kisā Gotamī, Vijayā, Uppala,vaṇṇā, Cālā, Upacālā, Sisūpacālā, Selā, and Vajirā—who are approached by Māra in the Andhavana.⁹

Once when Anuruddha is staying there, he falls seriously sick (S 5:302). It is here, according to **the Cūḷa Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (S 35.121), that the Buddha gives Rāhula the teaching that makes him an arhat.¹⁰ Those who occasionally stay in Andhavana include the elders Khema and Sumana (A 3:358); and also Sāriputta, who experiences a special kind of samadhi, whereby he realizes that the ending of existence (*bhava,nirodha*) is nirvana (A 5:9).

The Vammikā Sutta (M 23) recounts the Buddha’s answers to a riddle given by a brahma to Kumāra Kassapa while he is in Andhavana.¹¹ The brahma is a non-returner who was Kumāra Kassapa’s brother monk during Kassapa Buddha’s time [2.2]. At the time of the teachings of the Vammika Sutta, Kumāra Kassapa is staying in Andhavana training himself in the way of the learner (MA 2:124). He takes the teachings of this Sutta as the subject of his meditation and, developing insight, becomes an arhat (MA 2:134).

The Theragātha Commentary records a discussion here between Sāriputta and Puṇṇa regarding the purification of one’s deeds (*visuddhi,kamma*).¹²

The commentary on **the Pabbat’opama Sutta** (S 3.25) relate how once bandits, planning to usurp the throne, laid an ambush for Pasenadi as he went through the forest to pay his respects to the Buddha, attended by a small escort, as was sometimes his wont. He was warned in time and had the wood surrounded and impaling the bandits on either side of the road through the wood. The Buddha thought, “If I reprimand him for such a terrible deed, he will feel too dismayed to associate closely with me. Instead I will instruct him the Dharma in an appropriate manner (*pariyāyena dhamman*).” (SA 1:167)¹³

On the contrary, this is probably a *lectio difficilior potior* (the difficult reading is the more likely), where such a “difficult” reading or account, by the very fact of its inclusion, is probably the correct one, and especially when its exclusion would seem to reflect better on the Buddha. This is not to say that the Buddha is being politically correct, but that kings are creatures of great might and caprice, and can be destructive on a grand scale, provoked by the slightest unwelcome remark. More importantly, in spiritual terms, it is no point telling someone he is wrong when he is unwilling or unable to acknowledge the fact or benefit from it. As such, the Buddha is simply resorting to a skillful means in the teaching of the Pabbat’opama Sutta.

The Pārājikā section of **the Vinaya** (V 3:28-33) contains stories of monks who committed offences in the forest with shepherdesses and others, and also of some monks who ate the flesh of a cow that had been left behind partly eaten by cattle thieves (V 3:64). It is here that the nun Uppala,vaṇṇā obtains a piece of cow’s flesh which she asks Udāyi to offer to the Buddha, giving Udāyi her inner robe as a “fee” (V 3:208 f). The rule forbidding monks to enter a village clad only in their waist-cloth and lower garment was made with reference to a monk whose robe had been stolen by thieves in Andhavana (V 1:298).

The nun **Uppala,vannā** is raped in a hut in the forest by a young brahmin named Ānanda, and it is said that thenceforth nuns are not to live in Andhavana (DhA 2:49, 52). The Pārīchattaka Vimāna Vatthu (VvA 172 ff) is the story of a woman who, while collecting firewood in Andhavana, plucks an asoka flower and offers it to the Buddha, and thereby wins her celestial mansion (*vimāna*).

5 The parable of the ant-hill

The parable of the ant-hill is actually a set of similes and images reflecting various aspects of spiritual training. The parable is rich in psychological insight, and at least one modern practitioner and psycholog-

⁹ S 5/1:128-135; J 1:128 ff; ThĀ 64, 66, 163.

¹⁰ S 35.121/4:105-7; AA 1:259.

¹¹ M 23/1:142-145.

¹² ThA 1:39.

¹³ CAF Rhys Davids doubts the authenticity of this story (S:R 1:127 n.). Bodhi concurs and adds “that it even detracts from the solemn dignity of the Buddha’s discourse” (S:B 410 n257). On *pariyena*, see *Pariyāya Nipariyāya* = SD 68.2.

ist has applied it to psychoanalysis.¹⁴ The following are the ten sections of the riddle, with some explanations:¹⁵

(1) **The ant-hill (*vammika*)**. The Buddha begins by explaining that the ant-hill is *our human body*, formed of matter, biologically created, supported by food, and subject to change, pain and death. Although this might suggest purely a physical being—it is really a *being*; this is a body that is endowed with consciousness (*sa,viññāṇaka kāya*).¹⁶ This body-mind complex is made up of the five aggregate—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

Just as the ant-hill *fumes by night and burns by day*, we tend to mentally proliferates will all kinds of ideas in the night of our lives—when we are overwhelmed by ignorance and uncertainty—and carry out our plans and notions in the day of our lives—in our daily activities involving others. Here, the “night” also represents our latent tendencies (*anusaya*) and the “day” our volitional actions.

(2) **The knife (*sattha*)**. The *brahmin* tells us to *dig* into the ant-hill with *a knife (or tool)* so that in stages we discover a number of strange items. The Buddha hands us *a knife of wisdom* to dig deep into our *minds* to discover and understand its contents. The *wise* digger with the knife is the *learner (sekha)*, a saint yet to be an arhat, but surely *asserting effort* in that direction.

(3) **The door-bar (*laṅgī*)**. Interestingly, this imagery is used in the texts only to represent *ignorance (avijjā)*.¹⁷ The Commentary says that just as a bar across the city-gate prevents people from entering or leaving the city, even so *ignorance* keeps us stuck where we are, preventing us from progressing to nirvana (MA 2:131 f). Ignorance is the primal and most powerful of the latent tendencies.¹⁸ It lies deep in the human ant-hill, but pervades the whole of it, and is as such mentioned first.

The Vammika Sutta uses the door-bar imagery in a psychological sense, that is, in connection with meditation. In **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22) uses a similar imagery, the cross-bar (*paligha*) to represent ignorance in a spiritual sense, that is, in terms of liberation. The arhat is described as on who “has lifted the cross-bar” (*ukkhitta,paligha*), that is, abandoned spiritual ignorance.¹⁹

The *brahmin (the Buddha)* instructs us to *throw away (ukkhīpa)* the door-bar. Similarly, at each of the subsequent seven occasions of finding an object (or set of objects), the brahmin instructs us to throw it away. This represents the progressive stages of the unfolding of our wisdom by letting go of our mental defilements through mindful introspection and action.

(4) **The toad (*uddhu.māyikā*)** is a term for *anger and despair (kodhûpāyāsa)*. The Commentary glosses as *uddhu,māyikā* as *maṇḍûka*, “frog” (MA 2:128). The Critical Pali Dictionary defines *uddhu,māyikā* is the “bloating frog,” a small frog the size of a finger-nail swelling to the size of a wood-apple when irritated, and thus becoming the helpless prey of birds; use as a symbol of gradually increasing wrath.”²⁰

¹⁴ See Caroline Brazier 2003.

¹⁵ For related discourses and parables, see **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18) = SD 6.14 Intro (7).

¹⁶ M 3:18, 32, 36; S 2:252 f, 3:80 f, 103, 136 f, 169 f; A 1:132-134, 4:53. The term invariably appears as *sa.viññāṇaka,kāya* in Comys (MA 4:94, 104; SA 2:214). On *form*, see **Rûpa** = SD 17.2a.

¹⁷ M 1:142, 144; Pug 21; Dhs 39; VbhA 141.

¹⁸ Latent tendencies (*anusaya*). **Sallaṭṭhena S** (S 36.6) introduces the teaching of the latent tendencies (anusaya)¹⁸ or proclivities, of which **the 3 basic ones** (S 36.6.8bcd)—the latent tendency of lust (*rāgānusaya*), of aversion (*paṭighānusaya*), and of ignorance (*āvijjānusaya*)—are esp related to feelings. Another traditional expanded list gives 7 latent tendencies, ie,(1) sensual desire (*kāma,rāga*), (2) aversion (*paṭigha*), (3) views (*diṭṭhi*), (4) doubt (*vicikicchā*), (5) conceit (*māna*), (6) the desire for becoming (*bhava,rāga*), and (7) ignorance (*avijjā*). The latent tendency of sensual desire is lust itself, which is a “latent tendency” in the sense that it has gained strength (*thāma,gat’aṭṭhena*).¹⁸ **The Anusaya Sutta 1 and 2** (S 35.58-59)¹⁸ explain how the latent tendencies are to be abandoned and to be uprooted respectively. On the 7 anusaya, see **Saṅgīti S** (D 33.2.3(12)/3:254), **Anusaya S** (S 45.175/5:61) & **Vibhaṅga** (Vbh 383).

¹⁹ M 22.31/1:139 = SD 3.13; also A 3:84 = Nc 284; Sn 622 (“the lifting of the cross-bar of ignorance,” *avijjā,palighassa ukkhittattā*, SnA 467).

²⁰ M 1:142, 144; MA 2:128, 132; VvA 218.

The imagery evidently suggests that anger (*kodha*) tends to blow up things out of proportion, or that anger arises from an unwholesome sense of self (that is, selfishness). The bigger the bubble is, the easier and more painfully it bursts. Then there is despair (*upāyāsa*), that is, a sense of helplessness: not only we do we lack self-control in getting angry, but we also lose control of the situation. Anger at first gives a false sense of power (of being in control), but the unpleasant reality is that we have taken the easy but very harmful way out of a difficult situation.

The Commentary suggests a solution to all this, that is, by letting go of anger and despair by mindful reflection (*paṭisaṅkhāna-p.pahāna*) (MA 2:132). First, we need to accept the fact that we are angry. Then we should ask: *Why* am I angry? What am I *really* angry about? A simple process of such reflection quickly defuses or at least weakens the anger, as of the three unwholesome roots, anger (a manifestation of hate) is “a great fault but quick to fade away,” as stated in **the (Akusala.mūla) Añña,titthiyā Sutta** (A 3.68).²¹

(5) The forked path (*dvidhā,patha*) is a term for doubt (*vicikicchā*). This is not only a lack of certainty, but a lack of faith in goodness itself. Often because of a past hurts and fears, we become cynical, even fearsome of others. As a result we simply refuse to spend any time at really looking at our true self for fear of what we might see. **Caroline Brazier**, in her book, *Buddhist Psychology*, astutely observes,

People fail to commit in many ways. They may “go through the motions” of seeking change. They may waste time talking about things that, although possibly interesting, do not get to the heart of the matter. They may fritter time away on unimportant details to avoid looking more deeply at their behavior. They may repeat a story they have told many times before. They may skate around the subject rather than addressing it. At other times, someone may avoid facing their own patterns of thought and behavior by looking to many different people for support. They may enter into a number of relationships with different therapists, teachers or helping professionals, either simultaneously or by flitting from one to another. By this means they may avoid getting depth in any one relationship and avoid the personal issues they need to face.
(Brazier 2003: 121)

This “diurnal burning” of empty and cyclic business is really psychological defences arising from the “nocturnal fuming” of latent tendencies. In other words, certain *repressed* desires, dislikes and delusions are still controlling us to become *defensive* beings reacting with suspicion and falsehood to whatever we suspect as threatening our ego or sense of self. We are terribly afraid that what other say or do might burst the bubble of our self. So we cling on to the blanket or some comfort-toys of our mental childishness.

We often doubt whether we can ever change for the better. When we come to the fork (difficult situations and challenging choices) in life, we are petrified into remaining stuck right where we are, not knowing which path to take. What we need is Dharma-based self-knowledge; knowing our self, our weaknesses and strengths, so that we would wisely make the right choice or decision.

(6) The sieve (*caṅga,vāra*). The Commentary says that this is a “sieve for potash” (*khāra,parissāvana*, MA 2:128).²² The sieve or strainer or filter represents the five mental hindrances, that is, sense-desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt.

Sense-desire is our sense-reaction dictated by our latent tendency of lust (*rāgānusaya*), so that we tend to be hooked on to those experiences we regard as desirable and as such, pleasurable.

Ill will works the opposite way, dictated by the latent tendency of aversion (*paṭighānusaya*), so that we reject those experiences we regard as undesirable and as such, painful.

When the latent tendency of ignorance (*avijjā'nusaya*) dictates, we simply ignore the experience because it does not interest us; hence *sloth and torpor* arise.

²¹ A 3.68/1:199-201) = SD 16.4.

²² Cf *caṅga,vāraka* (Miln 365), tr as “dyers’ straining cloth” (Miln:RD 279), and at J 5:186, tr as “sieve” (J:F 5:96), where Comy says “as water placed in a dyer’s *khāra,caṅga,vāra* quickly runs out” (J 5:186).

Restlessness and remorse arise with our regretfully or guiltily thinking about the past, or wonder about the future so that we are ready to spring into action, as it were.

Doubt is the mental immobility that arises when we are variously assailed by these four hindrances, or when we lack the wisdom over what we should do, which keeps us in a rut of habitual tendencies. The doubt is of a deeper nature, as it is not so much as being uncertain about the choice of a path, but that on remaining stubbornly stuck to where we are, out of that fear we would lose “something” (*kiñcana*) if we should change.²³

When our minds are held back by these hindrances, our senses, especially our minds, act as *filters* rather than sensors and detectors of experiences. We gloat over what we see as pleasurable, spurn what we dislike, and ignore what we do not understand. We live predictable and cyclic lives. For this reason, the mental hindrances are said to be “the mental impurities that weaken wisdom” (*cetaso upakkilese paññāya dubbalī, karaṇe*), but when they are understood and abandoned, we are able to move on with our spiritual development, as described in **the Cha-ḷ-ābhijāti Sutta** (A 6.57).²⁴ The same Sutta says that

While living thus as a renunciant, having abandoned the five hindrances, the mental impurities that weaken wisdom, his mind well established in the four focusses of mindfulness, having cultivated the seven awakening-factors according to reality, he is reborn in nirvana.

(A 6.57.7+10/3:386 f) = SD 23.10

(7) The tortoise (*kumma*). The Commentary says that the tortoise’s four feet and head represents the five aggregates (MA 2:133). The meaning is that we should understand that on account of our physical body (*rūpa*), we experience feelings (*vedanā*) (painful, pleasurable, or neutral), which depends on our perception (*saññā*), or how we recognize the “signs and features” of our experiences.²⁵ Once we react to these experiences, formations (*sankhāra*), that is, karmic reactions, occur. All this happens on the stage of consciousness (*viññāna*).

In fact, **the Kumma Sutta** (S 35.240), where we are exhorted to draw our senses inward as a tortoise draws its limbs into its shell; for, Māra is like a hungry jackal ever ready to seize us through our sense-experiences.²⁶ This parable from the Kumma Sutta is not about the virtues of being introverted, but is an imagery on how we need to practise sense-restraint so as to filter out negative sense-stimuli, so that we can better and more fully focus on the mind so that it become calm and clear.²⁷

(8) The butcher’s knife and chopping block (*asi, sūnā*). The Commentary says that beings who desire sense-pleasures are chopped up by the butcher’s cleaver of sense-desires upon the block of sense-objects (MA 2:128, 133). Craving, as various levels of lust (esp worldly and spiritual), is so powerful that it is only totally abandoned by the arhat. Even in the streamwinner and the once-returner, there is desire for some sort of sense-pleasure and they are subject to various negative emotions. However, they would never consciously break any of the five precepts. The imagery here reminds us that if we reject the finer forms of craving, our journey to arhathood is accelerated.

(9) The piece of meat (*maṃsa, pesi*). The Commentary says that the piece of meat represents delight and lust (*nadī, rāga*) (MA 3:133 f). **The Potaliya Sutta** (M 54) gives a graphic imagery of how wanton attraction to sense-pleasures brings us suffering:

Householder, suppose a vulture, a heron or a hawk seizes a piece of meat and flies away. Then vultures, herons and hawks pursue it, and peck and claw it.

What do you think, householder? If that vulture, heron or hawk does not quickly let go of that piece of meat, would it not meet with death or suffer deadly suffering on that account?

²³ Cf “The brahmin is one who has attained to true knowledge, | having nothing (*akiñcana*), unattached to the sense-world” (Sn 1059).

²⁴ A 6.57.7+10/3:386 f = SD 23.10.

²⁵ See *Nimitta & Anuvyañjana* = SD 19.14.

²⁶ S 35.240/4:177-179 = SD 19.17; the PTS ed ref is S 35.199.

²⁷ See eg *Nimitta & Anuvyañjana* = SD 19.14.

(M 54.16/1:364) = SD 43.8

This Potaliya Sutta parable refers to the lust-driven reactions of an ignorant worldling. At this level, however, as the brahmin directs us to dig deeper into the ant-hill, we have reached the depths of our unconscious latent tendencies, especially that of lust, and we are told abandon this, too.

(10) The cobra (*nāga*). The final object dug out from the ant-hill is the *nāga*, which is here best contextually translated as “cobra,” even “king cobra.” At the close of **the Anaṅgaṇa Sutta** (M 5), Sāriputta and Moggallāna are called “the great nagas” (*mahā, nāga*).²⁸ The word *nāga* is commonly used in early Buddhist texts to refer serpents, especially those of great strength and powers,²⁹ and it often refers to the cobra, the most venomous and revered of Indian snakes.³⁰ Figuratively, *nāga* means “hero, saint,” symbolizing great spiritual strength and endurance. A popular etymology of the naga’s excellence is that “he does no evil” (*āgun na karoti*),³¹ that is, he is faultless.³² In this sense, *nāga* is often used as an epithet of the Buddha and the arhat.³³

In the riddle, the brahmin says of the cobra (*nāga*), **‘Let the naga be! Spite not the naga! Pay homage to the naga!’**³⁴ The Pali verb for “spite” (*ghaṭṭesi*; 3rd sg *ghaṭṭeti*) is interesting and has two main senses, the literal and the figurative. Literally, *ghaṭṭeti* means “he strikes, beats, knocks against, touch”,³⁵ and figuratively, “he offends, mocks, objects to.”³⁶ The meaning is that although all the nine previous objects are to be thrown away or abandoned, only this last one should be left untouched, that is, the arhat. For, he is the liberated being who is no more under the power of any of those objects, and as such deserves our respect and emulation.

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²⁸ *Mahā, nāga* is glossed as “influx-destroyed” (*khīṇ’āsava*), ie an arhat (MA 1:153; ThaA 2:121 ad Tha 703; VvA 284).

²⁹ D 1:54; S 3:240 f, 5:47, 63; B 1:30; J 1:64; DhA 2:4, 3:231, 242 f; PvA 272.

³⁰ Cf “serpent king” (*nāga, rāja*, Sn 379 & SnA 368; DhA 1:359, 2:231, 242 f, 4:129 f; J 2:111, 3:275)

³¹ **Nāga S** (A 6.43/3:346); **Sabhiya S** (Sn 522); Tha 693.

³² MA 1:153; SA 1:77; ThaA 3:8-11; SnA 2:410, 428; Nm 201 = Nc 337; Tha 693; PvA 57. See Tha:N 177 n289 for details.

³³ M 1:151, 386; S 2:277, 3:83; Dh 320; Sn 29, 53, 166, 421, 518; of the Buddha, Sn 522, 845, 1058, 1101.

³⁴ *Brāhmaṇo evam āha, “tiṭṭhatu nāgo, mā nāgaṃ ghaṭṭesi, namo karohi nāgassā ’ti.*

³⁵ Sn 48; J 1:218; Pv 4.10.9.

³⁶ A 3:343; Sn 847.

The Discourse on the Ant-hill

(M 23/1:142-145)

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika's park in Jeta's grove near Sāvattihī.

A brahma approaches Kumāra Kassapa

2 Now at that time, the venerable Kumāra Kassapa³⁷ was staying in Andha,vana [Blind Men's Forest].³⁸

Then, when the night was far advanced, a certain deity [devata]³⁹ of great beauty, illuminating the whole of Andha,vana, approached the venerable Kumāra Kassapa.

Having approached the venerable Kumāra Kassapa, he stood at one side.

Standing thus at one side, he said this to the venerable Kumāra Kassapa:

The riddle of the ant-hill

4 "Bhikshu, bhikshu!"⁴⁰

(1) 'This ant-hill (*vammika*) fumes by night and burns by day.'⁴¹

5 (2) Thus spoke the brahmin, 'Taking a knife (*sattha*), wise one, dig it up!'⁴²

(3) The wise one (*sumedha*), digging with the knife he had taken, saw a door-bar [bolt] (*laṅgī*), 'A door-bar, sir!'

6 Thus spoke the brahmin, 'Throw away the bar! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!'

(4) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a toad (*uddhu,māyikā*),⁴³ 'A toad, sir!'

7 Thus spoke the brahmin, 'Throw away the toad! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!'

(5) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a forked path (*dvidhā,patha*), 'A forked path, sir!'

8 Thus spoke the brahmin, 'Avoid the forked path! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!'

(6) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a sieve (*caṅga,vāra*), 'A sieve, sir!'

9 Thus spoke the brahmin, [143] 'Throw away the sieve! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!'

(7) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a tortoise (*kumma*), 'A tortoise, sir!'

10 Thus spoke the brahmin, 'Throw away the tortoise! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!'

³⁷ See Intro (2).

³⁸ See Intro (5).

³⁹ Comy says that this deity is a non-returner living in the Pure Abodes (*suddhāvāsa*), the 5 highest heavens of the form world (*rūpa,loka*) inhabited only by non-returners who assume their last birth to become arhats and attain nirvana. These worlds are Āviha ("Non-declining"), Ātappa ("Unworried"), Sudassā ("Clearly Visible"), Sudassī ("Clear-visioned") and Akaññīthā ("Highest") (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46).

⁴⁰ It is interesting that the brahma does not greet Kumāra Kassapa in the conventional manner. This is because in the time of Kassapa Buddha, the brahma is the seniormost of the 7 monks, and Kumāra Kassapa is the youngest. On account of the fact the the brahma dies a monk and a non-returner, he is spiritually still a monk, and as such addresses Kumāra Kassapa as a junior. Comy says that they have been friends, suggesting that out of familiarity, the brahma does not greet Kumāra Kassapa (MA 2:127)—this is difficult to understand.

⁴¹ *Ayam vammiko [v]l vammiko] rattim dhūmāyati, divā pajjalati.*

⁴² *Brāhmaṇo evam āha, "abhikkhaṇa, sumedha, satthaṃ ādāyā 'ti.*

⁴³ See Intro (5) (4).

(8) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a butcher's knife and chopping block (*asi,sūnā*),

‘A butcher's knife and chopping block, sir!’

11 Thus spoke the brahmin, ‘Throw away the butcher's knife and chopping block! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!’

(9) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a piece of meat (*māṃsa,pesī*),

‘A piece of meat, sir!’

12 Thus spoke the brahmin, ‘Throw away the piece of meat! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!’

(10) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a naga serpent [cobra] (*nāga*),⁴⁴

‘A naga serpent, sir!’

13 Thus spoke the brahmin, ‘Let the naga be! Spite⁴⁵ not the naga! Pay homage to the naga!’⁴⁶

14 These are the questions [riddles] for you, bhikshu. Approach the Blessed One and ask him. As the Blessed One explains, so should you remember it.

I see no one in this world with its devas, its maras [archetypal evil ones], its brahmas, its ascetics and brahmins, this generation with its rulers and people, who would, resorting the mind, be able to answer these riddles-except for the Tathagata or a Tathagata's disciples or from having heard from either of them.⁴⁷

The deity said this. Having said this, he vanished right there.

Kumāra Kassapa approaches the Buddha

15 Then, when the night has passed, the venerable Kumāra Kassapa approached the Blessed One, saluted him, and sat down at one side.

Seated thus at one side, the venerable Kumāra Kassapa said this to the Blessed One:

16 ‘Bhante, in the night, a certain deity [devata] of great beauty, illuminating the whole of Andhavana, approached me.

Having approached me, he stood at one side, and said this to me:

The riddle of the ant-hill (repeat)

17 (1) ‘Bhikshu, bhikshu! ‘This ant-hill fumes by night and burns by day.’

18 (2) Thus spoke the brahmin, ‘Having taken a knife, wise one, dig it up!’

(3) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a door-bar [bolt],

‘A door-bar, sir!’

19 Thus spoke the brahmin, ‘Throw away the bar! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!’

(4) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a toad (*uddhumāyika*),

‘A toad, sir!’

20 Thus spoke the brahmin, ‘Throw away the toad! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!’

(5) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a forked path (*dvidhā,patha*),

‘A forked path, sir!’

21 Thus spoke the brahmin, ‘Avoid the forked path! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!’

(6) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a sieve (*caṅga,vāra*),

‘A sieve, sir!’

⁴⁴ On the *nāga*, see Intro (5) (10).

⁴⁵ *Ghaṭṭesi*, for details, see Intro (5) (10).

⁴⁶ *Brāhmaṇo evam āha, “tiṭṭhatu nāgo, mā nāgaṃ ghaṭṭesi, namo karohi nāgassā ’ti.*

⁴⁷ *Nāhaṃ taṃ, bhikkhu, passāmi sa,devake loke sa,mārake sa,brahmake sa-s,samaṇa,brāhmaṇiyā pajāya sa,-deva,manussāya, yo imesaṃ pañhānaṃ veyyākaraṇena cittaṃ ārādheyya aññatra tathāgatena vā, tathāgata,sāvake-na vā, ito vā pana sutvā ’ti*

22 Thus spoke the brahmin, [143] ‘Throw away the sieve! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!’

(7) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a tortoise (*kumma*),
‘A tortoise, sir!’

23 Thus spoke the brahmin, ‘Throw away the tortoise! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!’

(8) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a butcher’s knife and chopping block (*asisūna*),

‘A butcher’s knife and chopping block, sir!’

24 Thus spoke the brahmin, ‘Throw away the butcher’s knife and chopping block! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!’

(9) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a piece of meat (*mamsa, pesi*),
‘A piece of meat, sir!’

25 Thus spoke the brahmin, ‘Throw away the piece of meat! Dig on with the knife you have taken, wise one!’

(10) The wise one, digging with the knife he had taken, saw a naga serpent [cobra] (*nāga*),
‘A naga serpent, sir!’

26 Thus spoke the brahmin, ‘Let the naga be! Spite not the naga! Pay homage to the naga!’

27 These are the questions [riddles] for you, bhikshu. Approach the Blessed One and ask him. As the Blessed One explains, so should you remember it.”

The deity said this; having said this, he disappeared right there.

Kumāra Kassapa’s questions

28 (1) What now, bhante, is the ant-hill?

(2) What is the knife?

(3) What is the door-bar?

(4) What is the toad?

(5) What is the forked path?

(6) What is the sieve?

(7) What is the tortoise?

(8) What is the butcher’s knife and chopping block?

(9) What is the piece of meat?

(10) What is the naga serpent?” [144]

The Buddha’s explanation⁴⁸

29 (1) “‘**The ant-hill**’ (*vammika*)—bhikshu, this is a term for this body, composed of the four great elements,⁴⁹ born from mother and father, nourished with rice and porridge, subject to inconstancy, rubbing, pressing, dissolution, and dispersion.⁵⁰

30 Bhikshu, what one thinks and ponders over by night on account of the day’s actions—this is the ‘**fuming by night.**’

31 Bhikshu, what one undertakes in the day by body, speech and mind after thinking and pondering in the night—this is the ‘**burning by day.**’

32 ‘**The brahmin**’ (*brāhmaṇa*)—bhikshu, this is a term for the Tathāgata [thus-come], the arhat [worthy], fully self-awakened.⁵¹

⁴⁸ For a more detailed analysis of these imageries, see Intro (5).

⁴⁹ The 4 great (or primary): earth (*mahā, bhūtā*), water, fire, wind (D 1:214; Vism 11.27; Abhs 154): see *Rūpa* = SD 17.2a.

⁵⁰ As at *Sāmañña, phala S* (D 2.85/1:76) = SD 8.10; *Dīgha, nakha S* (M 74.9/1:500); *Kevaddha S* (M 11.52/-1:215) = SD 1.7; *Mahā Sakul’udāyī S* (M 77.29/2:17); *Uddaka S* (S 35.103/4:83 f); *Kiṃsuk’opama S* (S 35.245/-4:194); *Kāma, bhū S* (S 41.5/4:292); *Gaṇḍa S* (A 9.15.2/4:386).

⁵¹ Cf def of *Brahmin* at A 4:144, qu at MA 2:130.

33 ‘Wise one’ (*sumedha*)—bhikshu, this is a term for a learner.⁵²

34 (2) ‘The knife’ (*sattha*)—bhikshu, this is a term for wisdom.

35 ‘Digging’ (*abhikkhaṇa*)—bhikshu, this is a term for the assertion of effort.⁵³

36 (3) ‘Door-bar’ (*laṅgī*)—bhikshu, this is a term for ignorance.

37 ‘Throw away the door-bar! Abandon ignorance! Dig on with the knife that you have taken’—this is its meaning.

38 (4) ‘The toad’ (*uddhumāyika*)—bhikshu, this is a term for anger and despair.

39 ‘Throw away the toad! Abandon anger and despair! Dig on with the knife that you have taken’—this is its meaning.

40 (5) ‘The forked path’ (*dvidhā, patha*)—bhikshu, this is a term for doubt.

41 ‘Avoid the forked path! Abandon doubt! Dig on with the knife that you have taken’—this is its meaning.

42 (6) ‘The sieve’ (*caṅga, vāra*)—bhikshu, this is a term for the five hindrances, that is to say:⁵⁴

- | | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. the mental hindrance of | sense-desire | (<i>kāma-c, chanda</i>); |
| 2. the mental hindrance of | ill will | (<i>vyāpādā</i>); |
| 3. the mental hindrance of | sloth and torpor | (<i>kāma-c, chanda</i>); |
| 4. the mental hindrance of | restlessness and remorse | (<i>uddhacca-kukkucca</i>); and |
| 5. the mental hindrance of | doubt | (<i>vicikicchā</i>). |

43 ‘Throw away the sieve! Abandon the five hindrances! Dig on with the knife that you have taken’—this is its meaning.

44 (7) ‘The tortoise’ (*kummāsa*)—bhikshu, this is a term for the five aggregates of clinging, that is to say:⁵⁵

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|--|
| 1. the aggregate of clinging that is | form | (<i>rūp’upādāna-k, khandha</i>); |
| 2. the aggregate of clinging that is | feeling | (<i>vedan’upādāna-k, khandha</i>); |
| 3. the aggregate of clinging that is | perception | (<i>saññ’upādāna-k, khandha</i>); |
| 4. the aggregate of clinging that is | formations | (<i>saṅkhār’upādāna-k, khandha</i>); and |
| 5. the aggregate of clinging that is | consciousness | (<i>viññāṇ’upādāna-k, khandha</i>). |

45 ‘Throw away the tortoise! Abandon the five aggregates of clinging! Dig on with the knife that you have taken’—this is its meaning.

46 (8) ‘The butcher’s knife and chopping block’ (*asi, sūnā*)—bhikshu, this is a term for the five cords of sense-pleasures, namely,⁵⁶

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. <u>forms</u> cognizable by the eye that are wished for, desirable, agreeable and pleasing, connected with sense-desire, arousing lust; ⁵⁷ | <i>cakkhu, viññeyyānaṃ rūpānaṃ iṭṭhānaṃ kantānaṃ manāpānaṃ piya, rūpānaṃ kāmūpasamhitānaṃ rajanīyānaṃ.</i> |
| 2. <u>sounds</u> cognizable by the ear that are wished for, desirable, agreeable and pleasing, connected with sense-desire, arousing lust; | <i>sota, viññeyyānaṃ saddānaṃ iṭṭhānaṃ kantānaṃ manāpānaṃ piya, rūpānaṃ kāmūpasamhitānaṃ rajanīyānaṃ.</i> |
| 3. <u>smells</u> cognizable by the nose that are wished for, desirable, agreeable and pleasing, connected with sense-desire, arousing lust; | <i>ghāṇa, viññeyyānaṃ gandhānaṃ iṭṭhānaṃ kantānaṃ manāpānaṃ piya, rūpānaṃ kāmūpasamhitānaṃ rajanīyānaṃ.</i> |

⁵² Cf def of *sikkhati...sekho* at A 1:231, qu at MA 2:231.

⁵³ That is, both physical and mental energy (MA 2:231).

⁵⁴ On the 5 hindrances, see *Pañca, nīvaraṇa* = SD 32.1.

⁵⁵ Comy says that the aggregates are like the tortoise’s 4 legs and the head (MA 2:133). Cf *Kummôpama S* (S 35.24) where the 5 parts are listed as “its limbs with the neck as the fifth” (*soṇḍi, pañcamānaṃ aigānaṃ*), but where they are compared to the 6 internal senses, and the shell or carapace representing the mind (S 35.24.4/4:178) = SD 19.17. See Intro (5) (6) above.

⁵⁶ “Five cords of sense-desire” (*pañca kāma, guṇa*): as in *Mahā Dukkha-k, khandha S* (M 13.7/1:85) = SD 6.9; *Laṭutikôpama S* (M 66.18/1:454) & Intro (3.3).

⁵⁷ *Cakkhu, viññeyyānaṃ rūpānaṃ iṭṭhānaṃ kantānaṃ manāpānaṃ piya, rūpānaṃ kāmūpasamhitānaṃ rajanīyānaṃ.*

4. tastes cognizable by the tongue that are wished for, *jivhā, viññeyyānaṃ rasānaṃ iṭṭhānaṃ*
desirable, agreeable and pleasing, *kantānaṃ manāpānaṃ piya, rūpānaṃ*
connected with sense-desire, arousing lust; and *kāmūpasamhitānaṃ rajanīyānaṃ.*

5. touches cognizable by the body that are wished for, *kāya, viññeyyānaṃ phoṭṭhabbānaṃ iṭṭhānaṃ*
desirable, agreeable and pleasing, *kantānaṃ manāpānaṃ piya, rūpānaṃ*
connected with sensual desire, [145] arousing lust. *kāmūpasamhitānaṃ rajanīyānaṃ.*

47 ‘Throw away the butcher’s knife and chopping block! Abandon the five cords of sense-pleasures! Dig on with the knife that you have taken’—this is its meaning.

48 (9) ‘The piece of meat’ (*maṃsa, pesi*)—bhikshu, this is a term for delight and lust.

49 ‘Throw away the piece of meat! Abandon delight and lust! Dig on with the knife that you have taken’—this is its meaning.

50 (10) ‘The naga serpent’ (*nāga*)—bhikshu, this is a term for the monk who is one with mental influxes destroyed.

51 ‘Let the naga be! Spite not the naga! Pay homage to the naga!’—this is its meaning.”

The Blessed One said this. The venerable Kumāra Kassapa, with a joyful mind, approved of the word of the Blessed One.

— evaṃ —

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